

## Freedom

Romans 7:15-25a

July 3, 2011

We've known each other for a little while now, you and me. So let me trust you with a secret: it is hard to preach on days that coincide with national and cultural holidays.

Mother's Day, Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, Earth Day, and, yes, the Fourth of July. It's not that I don't love, respect, or appreciate mothers, or turkey, or romance, or the earth, or the United States of America. It's just that I don't *worship* those things – and I don't believe the church should either.

Yes, it is much easier to preach on church-y holidays. Within scripture, there are biblical references for celebrations like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Passover – but there really aren't – without a stretch – biblical references for our national and cultural holidays.

Of course, the other side of the coin is that we live and move and have our being in a particular time, within a particular culture, and a particular nation. Our identity as 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens, and Americans is important. And, yes, our faith has bearing on this identity, as it should. Our faith and our Bible aren't things we lock away in some distant past. They guide us in the present and they should guide us in the future.

There is the tension – between wanting to be clear about who we worship: God and God alone, and the reality that this God has, is, and will be active and alive in the real world; past, present, and future.

So, on this Lord's Day – which happens to fall on the holiday weekend of the Fourth of July – the lectionary reading that speaks into our 21<sup>st</sup> century, American context is a piece of Paul's letter to the Romans where he describes the inner conflict that every one of us face: how to do what is right when our sin leads us the opposite direction.

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I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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At its heart, Paul's letter to the church in Rome –and this passage in particular – is treatise on freedom. That is, the freedom from sin and death and freedom for a kingdom-life that comes from understanding – and living like –Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the kind of freedom that Paul describes.

The freedom afforded to us by our country, about which our forefathers and mother's talked, is another kind. Freedom from tyranny. Freedom that protects our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Freedom of expression, religion, the press, and assembly. Freedom to form a militia and bear arms. These freedoms are to be treasured, defended, and they are what make our country strong and, indeed, a gift to the world.

Yet, while great, these freedoms are different than the freedom Paul talks about in this morning's scripture.

But that's not the end of the story. It seems clear to me that those who built the framework for our nation at Independence in 1776 and again in the passage of the Constitution in 1789 understood, at great depth, Paul's dilemma. In fact, knowing what we do about the make-up of the group that signed our founding documents – did you know that 12 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterians, including a

Presbyterian pastor named John Witherspoon? – understanding that, we can be assured that who we are as a country is shaped – at least in part – by the wisdom of scripture and the Bible’s understanding of the human condition.

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As Paul writes, his point is that nothing – not our will, not the law, not our good intentions – will prevent us from “doing the thing we hate,” or the thing that is wrong, unjust, or sinful.

Commenting on Paul’s words in Romans, the theologian Karl Barth said, “Sin certainly results when anyone plans a systemic justification and sanctification of themselves by their own actions.”<sup>1</sup>

In constructing our nation’s system of government, these same principles were at work. You remember from eighth grade civics class: In order for a bill to become a law, it has to pass both houses of congress and be signed by the President. In order to amend the constitution, two-thirds of each house of congress must approve the change along with three-fourths of the state legislatures. When something becomes law, it is still reviewable by the Judicial branch which interprets the law and resolves constitutional controversies. It is how we are designed. It is our national DNA. All of it means that power is shared, checked, balanced – and that change and progress often happen slowly.

It can be frustrating – but the reason checks and balances were written into our founding documents is because those who drafted them recognized that without them, we would certainly fall prey to bad choices and decisions.

Our country is built upon the premise that no one idea, philosophy, politician, political party, economic policy, or religion is good enough on its own. In fact, if one idea or politician or political party or philosophy or economic policy or expression of religion were to carry the day and go unchecked, we can be sure that the result would be catastrophic. Not because there isn’t truth and good intention in that one thing – but because we know that we cannot help doing the things we ought not to do when left to our own devices.

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, Karl, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963) p. 86.

For this reason, freedom – the kind of freedom that we treasure as citizens – is enhanced and preserved by diversity. Freedom comes alive when ideas are debated and shared and challenged and honed. Whereas like-mindedness – while perhaps easier for those of us who prefer life without conflict – is a dangerous ideal and a threat to freedom because it is a house of mirrors where ideas are neither checked nor balanced.

We live in a polarized and rigidly certain world. In this kind of world, where your love of country and your intelligence is questioned if you don't subscribe to...

Moveon.org's petition,  
Or Grover Norquist's pledge,  
Or the democratic party platform,  
Or the Tea Party manifesto...

...in this kind of world we need to remember that our country is better because of all these passionate points of view – and would be much worse if any of them became The Thing.

We need to remember that the value in our diversity and checks and balances and the reason for our humility about our own point of view is not about “political correctness” but has everything to do with the fact that we are limited when it comes to doing what is “right” and what is “good” and what is “just.” In fact, on our own, we cannot do what is “right” and what is “good” and what is “just.”

And finally, perhaps as disciples of the One we call Lord, we need to remember that ultimately even our freedom as citizens is limited, because after all, it is not our nation that saves us.

We are saved – and made truly free – not by our actions, or our right thinking, or our citizenship, but by the grace of the Jesus Christ. And we should not underestimate the value of that freedom. It is a freedom that liberates us from the grip of sin and death. It is a freedom that rescues us from the impossibility of saving ourselves. It is a freedom that allows us to experience what it means to be fully alive. It is a freedom that encourages us to pursue the values of God's kingdom – where there is justice, and mercy, and peace.

In the midst of this Independence Day weekend, I have a message for you. It is a message I am relaying from the Apostle Paul. It is a message of good news and one that affords you endless opportunity.

You are free.

Not because you deserve it or are entitled to it.

But because God has granted us that gift through Jesus Christ our Lord.

You are free.

So rejoice! And live like you are grateful...